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SUBJECT: ST. PETERSBURG'S MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS POST SCRIPT

1. (SBU) Summary: While United Russia won the March 1 municipal elections in St. Petersburg by a wide margin, its victory was tainted by accusations of electoral fraud. Allegations by opposition groups range from improper denial of candidate registration to outright vote stealing, and were fairly widespread throughout the city. City authorities have been reluctant to investigate the allegations, and so new revelations exposing electoral fraud are unlikely. End Summary.

A United Russia Victory, but With Some Issues

2. (SBU) St. Petersburg held its local council elections on March 1 in 108 of its 111 municipal districts. United Russia (YR) won over 75% of the contested seats with 1,145 victorious candidates. More than 99% of YR's candidates had been successfully able to register for the election. This was in stark contrast to the experience of large numbers of A Just Russia, KPRF, Yabloko and independent candidates whose candidate registration applications were often denied by their respective local district election commissions. Complaints to the City Election Commission (CEC) to overturn the decisions of the local election commissions were mostly unfruitful, as the CEC generally recommended the complainants refer their cases back to the local election commissions or take their complaints to the courts. Some opposition candidates were then able to register through the local election commissions or through the courts. However, this was often done only a few days before the election, and consequently the candidates were unable to effectively campaign. Various election-day irregularities also cast a pall on the process. Overall, opposition activists consider the St. Petersburg municipal election of March 1 to have been blatantly unfair and fraudulent.

Registration Difficulties Set the Tone

3. (SBU) A Just Russia had serious difficulties in registering its slate of candidates in the municipal election. Over 500 of its candidates were unable to register at all, and more than half of the party's registered candidates were able to register only after successfully arguing their case in front of either their respective local district election commissions or in the court system. Members of A Just Russia also claim the city district administrators (who are appointed by the governor) pressured their candidates to withdraw from the election, with those candidates whose jobs were government related (such as in the schools, universities, or hospitals) being subjected to particularly heavy pressure.

4. (SBU) Yabloko candidates had similar registration problems, with less than half of Yabloko-affiliated candidates making it onto the ballot. Even so, the leaders of the St. Petersburg branch of Yabloko believe that the current electoral system, with its five-seat municipal election districts, has proven beneficial for them. They note that their candidates who were on the ballot did quite well, often coming in 4th or 5th place even without strong campaigning, with five of the twelve official Yabloko candidates being elected. Two more Yabloko candidates also seem to have been elected, but have subsequently been embroiled in an ongoing court dispute (see para 10).

¶5. (SBU) Local Yabloko leader Mikhail Amosov commented that it had been difficult to implement Yabloko's informal pre-election agreement with A Just Russia to avoid running their candidates in the same districts, and thus dividing the anti-United Russia vote. Often, candidates were notified that they were officially registered just a few days before the election - after the withdrawal deadline. Consequently, all candidates remained on the ballot, and the votes of residents who did not want to support YR were split between several opposition candidates, thus enhancing United Russia's position.

Technicalities, Technicalities

¶6. (SBU) There were several ways the local district election commissions denied candidates' registration. One of the most common was for commission members to arbitrarily change the numbers of the electoral districts, and then not inform all potential candidates of the changes. Uninformed candidates thus put the wrong district numbers on their applications, and so had their applications rejected on the grounds of this "error." The written rejections for the invalid applications often came too late for the parties to hold another party conference which could re-nominate the rejected candidates using the correct district numbers. Suspiciously, it seemed that YR's candidates always knew the correct district numbers, and did not have this problem as YR candidates were generally registered without problem.

¶7. (SBU) Another common reason for registration rejection was based on the requirement that the party conferences which nominated a party's candidates had to be attended by representatives of the local election commissions in order to validate the nominated candidates. A Just Russia argues that it always sent invitations to the appropriate authorities and even received postal delivery confirmations for them. Nonetheless, local election commission members insisted they had never received the invitations, and thus ruled that the nominating conferences, and the nominated candidates, were invalid.

¶8. (SBU) Yabloko leaders also claim that many of their candidates' applications were dismissed because of various technicalities and rules that were unevenly applied. For example, Amosov had his registration rejected because the chairman of the local municipal unit (himself a Yabloko member) had collected signatures for Amosov. The local election commission deemed this activity to be an unlawful combination of municipal duties with electioneering, and so thus justified denying Amosov's registration.

Election Day Irregularities

¶9. (SBU) Opposition candidates also allege that fraud was committed on electionday itself. A leading member of A Just Russia alleges that his party members had discovered a ballot box already stuffed with ballots before the polls had even opened. Despite the eyewitness accounts, however, it took nearly a month before the law enforcement agencies opened a case to investigate the incident.

¶10. (SBU) Two candidates supported by Yabloko alleged that their victories were stolen, stating that the vote results were tampered with and changed after the two had received initial confirmation of their victories. The two candidates are attempting to restore the initial election results through the court system, and they have requested the prosecutors' office open a fraud investigation. Six weeks after the election, no investigation has been opened.

Possible Glimmers of Hope for Future Fairness?

¶11. (SBU) Interestingly, one of the United Russia candidates who

has officially won one of the allegedly stolen seats (para 10) has stated that he is willing to forego his "victory" and support the Yabloko candidate's case. The YR candidate blames the alleged fraud on the local city district administrator, who allegedly created obstacles not only for opposition candidates but also for many United Russia candidates new to the party and who apparently threatened the old boys' network in that district. This statement corresponds with the opinion of some local commentators who noted that United Russia's ranks were not unified in the election, and that there was some significant infighting between different factions of pro-government candidates.

¶12. (SBU) St. Petersburg City Election Commission officials have been generally reticent regarding the March 1 municipal elections. Commission members explain that election law does not grant them much power, and that as such local election disputes should be resolved through the local district election commissions and through the courts. Though their ability to enforce fairness in subsequent elections is limited, most senior City Election Commission officials agree that it would make sense to ease the registration rules and so minimize the problems seen in this election cycle.

¶13. (SBU) Comment. It is highly unlikely that United Russia's electoral victory was due entirely to fraud, as the party has a significant base of support in the city. However, it also seems undeniable that the elections were held on an uneven playing field in an environment which heavily favored United Russia. We are unlikely to ever know the real extent of electoral manipulation that went on before, during, and directly after the election, given the local authorities' apparent reluctance to investigate allegations of fraud. United Russia has built up an effective election winning machine in the city. This machine is unlikely to be dislodged without the emergence of both significant issues around which the opposition can rally and a profound change in the political culture that will no longer tolerate egregious electoral shenanigans. End Comment.

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